



Literature as Reflection: Temptation and Moral Consciousness in *Murder in the Cathedral* and *Doctor Faustus*

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Abstract— This paper presents literature as a reflection of human experiences through a comparative study of *Murder in the Cathedral* by T. S. Eliot and *Doctor Faustus* by Christopher Marlowe, focusing on their exploration of temptation, moral conflict, and human decision-making. While Eliot's play portrays temptation as an internal, spiritual struggle that requires self-awareness and purity of intention, Marlowe's tragedy presents it as a combination of ambition and external influence leading to moral downfall. Through close textual analysis and comparative interpretation, the study highlights the contrasting responses of Thomas Becket and Faustus, emphasizing the role of individual choice and responsibility. In addition, the paper incorporates a reflective dimension, demonstrating how these texts contribute to a deeper understanding of personal ethical and moral challenges. It argues that both works extend beyond their literary significance to function as guides for recognizing and resisting temptation in everyday life.



Keywords— Temptation, Moral Conflict, Ethical Decision-Making, Self-Awareness, Ambition, Spiritual Integrity, Tragedy, Human Choice, Literature and Ethics

“The last temptation is the greatest treason: to do the right deed for the wrong reason.”

—T. S. Eliot

Literature as a reflection

Literature is often viewed as a form of entertainment, a means of escaping reality through stories, characters, and imaginative worlds. While this perspective is not entirely incorrect, it is incomplete. Literature does more than entertain; it reflects human experiences, explores complex emotions, and presents moral dilemmas that closely resemble real-life situations. Through these qualities, literature becomes a powerful tool that can influence decision-making and shape an individual's understanding of life. Works such as *Murder in the Cathedral* by T. S. Eliot and *Doctor Faustus* by Christopher Marlowe clearly demonstrate that literature can function as a guide, helping

individuals navigate ethical challenges and personal choices.

One of the most important ways in which literature contributes to decision-making is by presenting situations that require moral judgment. Characters in literary works often face difficult choices, and their actions lead to consequences that reveal the complexity of human behaviour. When readers engage with these narratives, they are not passive observers. Instead, they are encouraged to think critically about what they would do in similar situations. This process develops a sense of moral awareness. For instance, in *Murder in the Cathedral*, the character of Thomas Becket is confronted with various

temptations that test his integrity. His struggle is not just a historical or religious event but a reflection of the internal conflicts that individuals experience in their own lives. By observing how he evaluates and ultimately rejects these temptations, readers gain insight into the importance of self-awareness and ethical clarity.

Similarly, *Doctor Faustus* presents a contrasting perspective. Faustus is a scholar who chooses to pursue power and knowledge without considering the moral consequences of his actions. His decisions lead to his downfall, demonstrating the dangers of ambition when it is not guided by responsibility. Through Faustus's story, readers are reminded that decisions made without careful thought can have lasting and irreversible consequences. This awareness can influence how individuals approach their own choices, encouraging them to consider not only immediate benefits but also long-term effects.

Another way in which literature serves as a useful tool is by helping individuals understand themselves better. Many literary works explore the inner thoughts and emotions of characters, revealing their fears, desires, and motivations. This introspective quality allows readers to recognize similar patterns in their own thinking. For example, the concept of doing the right thing for the wrong reason, as highlighted in *Murder in the Cathedral*, is particularly relevant in everyday life. People often justify their actions by focusing on the outcome rather than the intention behind it. Literature encourages readers to question such justifications and to examine their true motives. This process of self-reflection can lead to more thoughtful and responsible decision-making.

In addition to fostering self-awareness, literature also develops empathy. By engaging with diverse characters and perspectives, readers learn to understand experiences that are different from their own. This ability to empathise is essential for making fair and ethical decisions, especially in situations that involve other people. When individuals consider the feelings and viewpoints of others, they are more likely to act with compassion and understanding. Literature, therefore, not only shapes personal decisions but also contributes to the development of social responsibility.

Moreover, literature provides a safe space for exploring consequences. In real life, decisions often come with risks and uncertainties, and the outcomes cannot always be predicted. However, in literature, readers can observe the consequences of actions without experiencing them directly. This allows them to learn from the successes and failures of characters. For instance, the tragic end of Faustus serves as a warning about the dangers of ignoring moral boundaries, while the steadfastness of Becket demonstrates the value of integrity and conviction. These lessons remain

with readers and can influence their behaviour in real-life situations.

It is also important to note that literature does not provide direct instructions or simple solutions. Instead, it presents complex situations that require interpretation and critical thinking. This aspect makes literature particularly valuable, as it encourages individuals to develop their own judgments rather than relying on predetermined answers. By engaging with literary texts, readers learn to analyse situations, weigh different perspectives, and arrive at conclusions based on careful consideration. These skills are essential for making informed decisions in everyday life.

Furthermore, literature connects individual experiences to broader human concerns. Themes such as ambition, temptation, responsibility, and morality are not limited to specific cultures or time periods. They are universal aspects of human existence. By exploring these themes, literature helps individuals understand that their struggles are part of a larger human experience. This realization can provide comfort and guidance, making it easier to navigate challenges and uncertainties.

It is clearly understood that literature is far more than a source of entertainment. It is a meaningful and practical tool that contributes to personal growth and ethical decision-making. Through the exploration of moral dilemmas, the development of self-awareness, the cultivation of empathy, and the examination of consequences, literature equips individuals with the skills needed to make thoughtful and responsible choices. Works like *Murder in the Cathedral* and *Doctor Faustus* demonstrate how powerful this influence can be. By engaging with literature, readers do not simply escape reality; they gain a deeper understanding of it, enabling them to approach life's decisions with greater clarity, insight, and integrity. Among all the human experiences, dealing with temptation eventually leading to moral and ethical decision making is explored below using the two plays.

Treatment of Temptation

Temptation is a universal human experience, yet it often operates in quiet and complex ways that are not immediately visible. Literature provides a powerful means of understanding this experience by presenting it in structured and meaningful forms. *Murder in the Cathedral* by T. S. Eliot and *Doctor Faustus* by Christopher Marlowe are two significant works that explore the nature of temptation and moral struggle. Although these plays belong to different historical periods, they present deeply similar concerns about human nature in depth, the decision-making at difficult times, ethical responsibility, and the consequences of choice.

The historical context of each play plays a crucial role in shaping its treatment of temptation. *Doctor Faustus* was written during the Renaissance, a period that emphasized human potential, intellectual curiosity, and ambition. Faustus represents this spirit through his desire to acquire limitless knowledge and power. However, this desire ultimately leads to his downfall, suggesting that ambition without moral restraint can be destructive. As Bevington notes, Faustus reflects the aspirations and anxieties of Renaissance humanism (Bevington 12).

In contrast, *Murder in the Cathedral* emerges from a twentieth-century context marked by spiritual uncertainty. Eliot responds to this uncertainty by emphasising faith, discipline, and moral clarity. The play dramatizes the final days of Thomas Becket, focusing on his confrontation with various temptations before his martyrdom. Rather than celebrating ambition, Eliot highlights the importance of self-awareness and the purification of intention. Gardner observes that Eliot's work reflects a deep concern with spiritual integrity and ethical responsibility (Gardner 45). One of the most striking aspects of Eliot's play is the structured presentation of temptation through four tempters. Each tempter represents a different form of desire: physical comfort, political power, revenge, and spiritual pride. The progression of these temptations illustrates how moral challenges become increasingly subtle. The fourth temptation is particularly significant because it appears virtuous. The desire to become a martyr seems noble, but it becomes problematic when motivated by pride. Eliot captures this idea when he writes that "the last temptation is the greatest treason: to do the right deed for the wrong reason" (Eliot 44).

This insight reveals that temptation is not always clearly negative. In everyday life, individuals often face situations where their actions appear morally correct but are influenced by questionable motives. For example, a person might help others not out of genuine concern but in order to gain recognition or approval. Eliot's play encourages readers to examine their intentions carefully and to recognize the complexity of moral decision-making.

In *Doctor Faustus*, temptation is more direct but equally complex. Faustus is offered knowledge and power in exchange for his soul, and he consciously accepts this bargain. However, his decision is not entirely straightforward. Throughout the play, he experiences moments of doubt and hesitation. The presence of the Good Angel and the Evil Angel represent his internal conflict, illustrating the tension between conscience and desire. Faustus's famous declaration that "a sound magician is a mighty god" reflects his ambition and foreshadows his tragic fate (Marlowe 8).

Both plays emphasize the psychological dimension of temptation. In Eliot's work, the tempters can be interpreted as manifestations of Becket's inner thoughts. They represent his fears, ambitions, and doubts, making the play deeply introspective. Similarly, in Marlowe's play, the Good and Evil Angels externalize Faustus's internal struggle. These representations highlight the idea that temptation is not merely an external force but a complex interaction between external influences and internal desires.

A key theme in both works is the importance of personal choice. Despite the presence of external influences, both Becket and Faustus are ultimately responsible for their decisions. Becket achieves moral clarity by rejecting all forms of temptation, including the desire for spiritual glory. His martyrdom is portrayed as a victory of integrity rather than a defeat. In contrast, Faustus repeatedly fails to act on his moral awareness. Even when he recognizes the consequences of his actions, he delays repentance and continues on his destructive path.

The contrast between these two characters highlights the consequences of different responses to temptation. Becket's resistance leads to spiritual fulfilment, while Faustus's submission results in tragedy. This contrast underscores the importance of aligning one's actions with one's values and acting decisively in moments of moral conflict. Engaging with these plays has had a significant impact on my understanding of temptation. *Murder in the Cathedral* encouraged me to reflect on the importance of intention. It made me realise that even actions that appear morally correct can be influenced by hidden motives such as pride or the desire for recognition. This awareness has helped me approach decisions with greater honesty and self-examination.

At the same time, *Doctor Faustus* served as a cautionary example of how small ethical compromises can accumulate over time. Faustus's downfall is not the result of a single decision but a series of choices that gradually lead him away from his values. This insight has encouraged me to pay closer attention to everyday decisions and to consider their long-term consequences.

These plays demonstrate that literature is not merely a form of entertainment but a valuable tool for understanding human behaviour. By presenting complex characters and situations, literature allows readers to explore ethical questions in a reflective and meaningful way. The lessons derived from these texts can be applied to various aspects of life, including academic integrity, professional ethics, and personal relationships.

On the whole, *Murder in the Cathedral* and *Doctor Faustus* provide profound insights into the nature of temptation and moral decision-making. Through their contrasting

portrayals of resistance and submission, they highlight the importance of self-awareness, intention, and responsibility. While Eliot emphasizes spiritual discipline and ethical clarity, Marlowe illustrates the dangers of unchecked ambition and moral negligence. Together, these works offer a comprehensive understanding of temptation and its role in shaping human experience. Most importantly, they show that the struggle against temptation is not extraordinary but universal, and that literature can play a crucial role in helping individuals navigate this struggle with greater awareness and integrity.

Personal Reflection: Literature and My Experience with Temptation

While the analytical study of *Murder in the Cathedral* and *Doctor Faustus* helped me understand the structure and meaning of temptation, their real impact became visible only when I began to relate them to my own life. These works did not remain as distant literary texts for me; instead, they gradually became practical guides that shaped the way I observe and respond to everyday situations.

One of the most important things I learned from *Murder in the Cathedral* is that temptation does not come in a single, obvious form. It appears step by step, often in ways that seem reasonable or even harmless. The four tempters in the play made me realise that temptations can be divided and understood one by one. This idea changed my perspective completely. Earlier, I used to think of temptation as something sudden and difficult to control, but Eliot's presentation showed me that it can be recognised early if one is attentive.

Because of this understanding, I now try to observe situations more carefully. When I face a choice, I often pause and think about the intention behind my action. There have been moments when I have been drawn toward something that seemed beneficial at first but did not feel entirely right. In such situations, remembering Becket's struggle has helped me stop and reflect. I may not always avoid temptation immediately, but I have learned to recognize it sooner and prevent it from developing further. This ability to pause and reconsider is something I directly connect to my reading of the play.

Another important lesson from Eliot's work is the idea that even a good action can become wrong if it is done for the wrong reason. This concept influenced me deeply because it made me question my own motivations. For example, while working on academic tasks, I sometimes found that my efforts were driven more by the desire for appreciation than genuine interest. Recognising this helped me shift my focus toward sincerity rather than external validation. In this way, the play did not just teach me about temptation but also about honesty with myself.

In contrast, *Doctor Faustus* affected me in a different but equally powerful way. Unlike *Murder in the Cathedral*, where temptation is clearly presented, in *Doctor Faustus* it is not always openly identified. As readers, we can clearly see that Faustus is being tempted, but he himself fails to recognise it or chooses to ignore it. This distance between the reader's understanding and the character's awareness became a significant lesson for me.

Faustus's downfall is not sudden. He gradually moves further into his choices until he reaches a point where returning becomes extremely difficult. This made me realise how dangerous it is to ignore small warnings. In real life, we often justify our actions, telling ourselves that we are still in control. However, Faustus's story shows that repeated small decisions can lead to a situation where control is lost.

What impacted me the most was the idea that Faustus had opportunities to change but did not act on them. This taught me that recognising a mistake is not enough; it is necessary to take action immediately. Whenever I find myself delaying a decision that I know is right, I am reminded of Faustus and the consequences of postponement. This reflection has helped me become more decisive in situations that involve ethical and moral choices.

These two plays together created a balance in my understanding. *Murder in the Cathedral* taught me how to identify and resist temptation, while *Doctor Faustus* showed me what happens when temptation is ignored or misunderstood. One gave me awareness, and the other gave me caution. Because of this, I do not see temptation as something abstract anymore. It has become something real, something that I can observe, analyse, and respond to consciously.

I also feel that this experience is not limited to me alone. Anyone who truly engages with these texts can apply their ideas to their own life. Literature, in this sense, becomes more than a subject of study. It becomes a way of thinking. It trains the mind to question, to reflect, and to act with awareness. When readers connect with characters and situations, they begin to see patterns that exist in their own lives.

In conclusion, *Murder in the Cathedral* and *Doctor Faustus* have had a lasting impact on my moral consciousness. They have changed the way I look at decisions, not by giving direct answers but by helping me understand the process behind those decisions. These works continue to guide me in small but important ways, reminding me to stay aware, to act responsibly, and to remain honest with my intentions. For me, this is the true power of literature, it does not simply tell a story, but it stays with us and influences how we live.

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